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ABSTRACT

Intended for administrators and policymakers as well as teachers, this digest examines invented spelling, describes the developmental stages of learning how to spell, and considers implications for classroom instruction. After defining invented spelling, the digest describes the precommunicative, semiphonetic, phonetic, transitional, and correct stages of spelling development. It then explores ways teachers can nurture spelling development in the classroom, including combining an understanding of invented spelling with formal spelling instruction to develop more effective spelling programs. (HTH)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills

ERIC Digest

Invented Spelling and Spelling Development

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In the past, spelling was usually taught as a separate subject; memorization was thought to be the key to its mastery. Even now, most elementary schools use spelling series and treat spelling as a subject separate from the other language arts. However, during the past decade, language researchers have shed new light on the spelling process. The acquisition of spelling rules is now viewed as a complex developmental process. Once the stages of this process are identified, elementary teachers can help students develop strategies for learning standard English spelling, and they can assess students' progress more accurately. This digest defines invented spelling, describes the developmental stages, and considers implications for classroom instruction.

What Is Invented Spelling?

Invented spelling refers to young children's attempts to use their best judgments about spelling. In one of the first major studies of children's beginning attempts at learning to spell, linguist Charles Read (1975) examined the writing of thirty preschoolers who were able to identify and name the letters of the alphabet and to relate the letter names to the sounds of words. The students had "invented" spellings for words by arranging letters. Read writes, "One sees clearly that different children chose the same phonetically motivated spellings to a degree that can hardly be explained as resulting from random choice or the influence of adults." In other words, even at an early age, the children were able to detect phonetic characteristics of words that English spelling represents. Read concluded that, by and large, "learning to spell is not a matter of memorizing words, but a developmental process that culminates in a much greater understanding of English spelling than simple relationships between speech sounds and their graphic representations."

What Are the Stages of Spelling Development?

As preschool and early elementary school children discover the intricacies of printed English, they go through several stages of spelling development. Gentry (1982), building on Read's research, describes five stages: precommunicative, semiphonetic, phonetic, transitional, and correct.

In the precommunicative stage, the child uses symbols from the alphabet but shows no knowledge of letter-sound correspondences. The child may also lack knowledge of the entire alphabet, the distinction between upper- and lower-case letters, and the left-to-right direction of English orthography.

In the semiphonetic stage, the child begins to understand letter-sound correspondence—that sounds are assigned to letters. At this stage, the child often employs rudimentary logic, using single letters, for example, to represent words, sounds, and syllables (e.g., *U* for *you*).

Children at the phonetic stage use a letter or group of letters to represent every speech sound that they hear in a word. Although some of their choices do not conform to conventional English spelling, they are systematic and easily understood. Examples are *KOM* for *come* and *EN* for *in*.

During the transitional stage, the speller begins to assimilate the conventional alternative for representing sounds, moving from a dependence on phonology (sound) for representing words to a reliance on visual representation and an understanding of the structure of words. Some examples are *EGUL* for *eagle* and *HIGHEKED* for *hiked*.

In the correct stage, the speller knows the English orthographic system and its basic rules. The correct speller fundamentally understands how to deal with such things as prefixes and suffixes, silent consonants, alternative spellings, and irregular spellings. A large number of learned words are accumulated, and the speller recognizes incorrect forms. The child's generalizations about spelling and knowledge of exceptions are usually correct.

Gentry notes that the change from one spelling stage to the next is a gradual one and that examples from more than one stage may coexist in a particular sample of writing. However, children do not fluctuate radically between stages, passing from phonetic back into semiphonetic spelling or from transitional back to phonetic. According to Carol Chomsky (1976), the major need for inventive spellers who are beginning to read is to have someone to answer their questions and correct their mistakes, such as the misreading of words, when necessary.

It is clear that instruction in standard spelling shapes the developmental process in important ways. Read's research shows that the characteristics of invented spelling do change after exposure to standard spelling instruction. However, some children's spelling shows aspects of invented spelling for several years. But even these children do not have any special difficulty in adapting to standard spelling. Read's conclusion is that children's understanding of spelling is based on a set of tacit hypotheses about phonetic relationships and sound-spelling correspondences, and that children are able to modify these hypotheses readily as they encounter new information about standard spelling.

How Can Teachers Nurture Spelling Development in the Classroom?

An awareness of spelling development can help teachers plan instruction. For precommunicative and semiphonetic spellers,

teachers may teach alphabet knowledge, letter-sound correspondences, the concept of "wordness," and left-to-right directionality. At the phonetic stage, students might be introduced, in the context of writing, to word families, spelling patterns, phonics, and word structures (Gentry 1982).

Gentry holds that purposeful writing experiences are the key to cognitive growth in spelling. Teachers can encourage purposeful writing, such as the writing of messages, lists, plans, signs, letters, stories, songs, and poems.

Teachers can also provide opportunities for frequent writing, which, integrated with all aspects of the curriculum, should be a natural part of the daily classroom routine. Frequent application of spelling knowledge while writing encourages spelling competency.

In teaching students to write, teachers should avoid overemphasis on absolute correctness, mechanics, and memorization. Early emphasis on mechanical aspects of spelling inhibits developmental growth. When frequent purposeful writing takes precedence, adherence to the rules is secondary. The teacher in no sense abandons expectations for correctness. Rather, correctness is nurtured more effectively through knowledge of the pupils' level of development.

Teachers can also make use of instructional games since children acquire language, in large part, from their alertness to language around them. Hodges (1981) points out that language games can be used to enhance the young child's growing awareness of words and how they are spelled. In *Learning to Spell*, Hodges presents games that involve exploring sound and letter relationships, manipulating letters to form words, building words, alphabetizing, and using the dictionary.

Finally, teachers can select spelling words from varied sources. For example, teachers can select words for formal instruction from two sources: their students' own writing and a list of high frequency words, such as the New Iowa Spelling Scale of 1977 (DiStefano and Hagerty 1985).

If schools are to make use of recent insights into children's language development, changes in teacher and public attitudes are required. Teachers must be encouraged to relate spelling to purposeful writing rather than to conduct rule-based instruction or to rely on memorization. Students' invented spellings must be seen as opportunities for them to contribute actively to their own learning. Then, by combining an understanding of invented spelling with formal spelling instruction, teachers should be able to develop more effective spelling programs.

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